

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 431 200

CS 510 063

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TITLE Considering the Rhetorical Theory and History of Gendered Messages.
PUB DATE 1999-04-10
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Joint Meeting of the Central States Communication Association and the Southern States Communication Association (St. Louis, MO, April 7-11, 1999).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Feminist Criticism; Higher Education; Intellectual History; *Philosophy; *Rhetorical Theory; Student Needs
IDENTIFIERS Aristotle; Classical Rhetoric; *Gender Issues; *Misogyny; Plato of Athens

ABSTRACT

The predominance of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies in Western culture has affected theories of rhetoric and gender in related ways and set the stage for two millennia of misogyny based on the rhetorical construction of women as "naturally" inferior beings who thus had no ontological right to engage in the dominant knowledge-creating discourses and conversations of their societies. This historical understanding is important to the contemporary student of communication for at least two reasons: (1) students should understand the consequences for communication of the hegemonic role of Platonic and Aristotelian thinking; and (2) students should be familiar with the ways in which the construction of "gender guided" (or "misguided") rhetorical history and theory. Contains 13 references. (NKA)

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**CONSIDERING THE RHETORICAL THEORY AND HISTORY
OF GENDERED MESSAGES**

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Presented at the Sixty-Ninth Annual Convention of
The Southern States Communication Association
in St. Louis, Missouri
as part of the panel on
"The Study of Rhetorical Theory Across The Field"

Saturday, April 10, 1999

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CONSIDERING THE RHETORICAL THEORY AND HISTORY OF GENDERED MESSAGES

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In recent years, gender studies has become an important component in many communication programs since gender plays an influential role in all forms of communication. Yet while most students of communication are taught to identify gendered strategies in mass mediated messages--as media studies is a popular area in the field--it has been my observation that few seem to understand the role that rhetorical history and theory have played in the construction of gender in contemporary Western cultures. For example, recently in a rhetorical criticism class, a group of communication majors presented findings from their analysis of magazine advertisements and noted that regardless of the product or service being sold, women were used more frequently (and in more obviously gendered ways) than men. Yet these same students were ill prepared to make sense of this situation. While relatively well educated, they were unable to link the history of the rhetorical construction of women as silenced objects to be acted upon (in comparison to the construction of men as speakers, actors, and doers) with what they had observed in contemporary advertising. Had they an historical knowledge of the depth and breadth

of imbedded messages concerning the "nature" and role of women in society, these contemporary advertisements would have struck them as inevitable rather than surprising.

In this paper I argue that the predominance of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies in Western culture affected theories of rhetoric and gender in related ways and set the stage for two millennia of misogyny based on the rhetorical construction of women as "naturally" inferior beings who thus had no ontological right to engage in the dominant knowledge-creating discourses and conversations of their societies. Further, I suggest that this historical understanding is important to the contemporary student of communication for at least two reasons: (1) students should understand the consequences for communication of the hegemonic role of Platonic and Aristotelian thinking, and (2) students should be familiar with the ways in which the construction of gender guided (or misguided) rhetorical history and theory.

Platonic Idealism and Aristotelian Empiricism vs. Sophistic Pluralism

Scholars and students of classical rhetorical theory are aware of the central philosophical tension which came into sharp focus around the fifth century, B.C. in Greece due to differences in the ontological and epistemological groundings between Plato and the sophists. Plato sought--and believed he could find--an absolute, immutable reality and truth through the study of abstractions. This idealist philosophy is centered in Plato's theory of forms and is perhaps most simplistically explained via his "allegory of the cave." In contrast, the "older" sophists--coming as they did from the tradition of the pre-Socratic philosophers--believed that human truth and reality were a product of social and linguistic constructions. As Yvonne Merrill explains, "... classical rhetoric had already provided the necessary basis for ... [the] linguistic construction of reality by

assuming the interdependence of rhetoric and civic values, or ethics" (1996, p. 11). Indeed, the principle of *dissoi-logoi*--the notion that "on every issue there are at least two arguments opposing one another"--developed by Protagoras and continued by other sophists and teachers of rhetoric is one example of the sophistic recognition of opposing forces in any social construction (Poulakos & Poulakos, 1999, p. 6; Merrill, 1996, p. 29). Plato, then, devoted significant time to argument against the sophists in dialogues now central to the study of rhetorical history: the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus*. As James Hixson put it: "Plato's critique of the Sophists thus turns on the fundamental epistemological distinction between discourse grounded in *subjectivist-based* theories of knowing on the one hand and *objectivist-based* theories of knowing on the other" (1981, p. 161). With but a few broad brush strokes, Plato successfully painted the sophists as crass, opportunistic tricksters who concocted a rhetoric which was little more than the worst form of flattery (*Gorgias*).

In the midst of this rancorous debate stood the ever practical Aristotle, Plato's student, who developed an empirical philosophy which was both rational and teleological. Merrill summarizes the Platonic and the Aristotelian views as follows:

For simplicity's sake, the opposing views of Platonic idealism and Aristotelian positivism could be characterized as the subjective versus objective views of reality. In any case, the former clearly devalues empirical reality as untrustworthy and subordinate to a higher realm of abstractions while the latter defines sensory experience as the primary object of rational study (1996, pp. 7-8).

As rhetoric was designated by Plato and his students as a false art, the pre-Socratic, philosophical roots of the older sophists were either ignored or rejected in favor of Plato's search--by the philosopher king--for absolute truth. The role of symbols--of rhetoric--in the creation of socially constructed reality, then, gave way to an objectivist epistemology. Important implications in

Protagoras' inception of early humanism in the famous lines "Man is the measure of all things, of things that are in so far as they are and of things that are not in so far as they are not" (quoted in Kennedy, 1994, pp. 7-8) as well as in Gorgias' central statement in his treatise on nonexistence, *On Nature*, "that nothing exists, that if it does exist it cannot be known, and that if it could be known knowledge could not be communicated by one person to another" were, for the most part, ignored (Kennedy, p. 8).

And, as Platonic and Aristotelian thought overpowered the philosophical perspective of the sophists and their predecessors, the notion of the rhetorical construction of reality was buried beneath an avalanche of absolutist thinking. This led to the demise of the complexity of the underlying sophistic understanding of the power of language.

Effects on Women

The hegemonic reign of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy has had widespread historical effects on how scholars came to view the sophistic tradition. Indeed, until the re-elevation of rhetoric during the Italian renaissance by theorists like Vico, and the more contemporary rediscovery of rhetoric by postmodern theorists, the sophists' philosophical and rhetorical perspective enjoyed only brief respites from a long history of denigration in Western thought.

But the consequences of the reign of idealist philosophies were felt not only by the sophists and perhaps rhetoricians in general, but also by women. In turn, both Plato and Aristotle constructed definitions of women which denied them access to and an active role in the social-political discourse and dialogue of the time; that is, women--but for some notable exceptions--were barred from the public sphere, the Greek *polis*. Plato proclaimed that women were lesser men: "cowardly men are reborn as women" (*Timaeus*), while Aristotle defined women as a

deformity, the "mutilated male" (*Metaphysics*). Both definitions carefully camouflaged social constructions as natural law. And natural law, of course, is undeniable and immutable. Indeed, Merrill argues that "Aristotle's works became the principal philosophic legitimations for the social construction of women and their functions. As empirical observations, his descriptions [based on observations of animals] claimed scientific objectivity and factual status" (1996, p. 50).

Furthermore, Merrill posits that "To reinforce the bourgeois *polis*, two particular ideological themes emerged: the identification of women's nature with nature itself, and the denigration of the natural in favor of the civilized" (1996, p. 49)

Apparently Plato found in women problems similar to those he had with the sophists. Susan Jarratt has argued that the political implications of the sophistic tradition were threatening to Plato and his anti-democratic sentiments. She explains that, "by drawing on evolutionary theories of human origins and development, the sophists argued for the most diverse range of human potentialities capable of cultivation by society, for which the process of public discourse, including the teaching of civic virtue, was essential" (1990, p. 28). Plato's hierarchically structured republic contrasted starkly with the egalitarian sentiments of the sophists. As Jarratt notes, "This very process of rank ordering knowledge carries gender implications" (1990, p. 28). Furthermore, Jarratt argues that "Though Plato provided a place for women in his ideal republic, and despite the fact that women of course were oppressed well before the fifth century, the philosophical edifice built by Plato and his student Aristotle has provided a *conceptual* ground for centuries' more exclusions" (1990, p. 28)

Several feminist writers, including Jarratt, Merrill, Lunsford, and Swearingen, have noted that Plato's contempt for sophistic pluralism extends to his perspective on women. Indeed, these

writers have argued that Plato treats specific women in his writings as symbols for the very sophistic pluralism he so distrusted. In Plato's *Menexenus*, the author describes Pericle's mistress and Socrates teacher, Aspasia, in such a way as to locate her within the sophistic tradition. Indeed, Jarratt and Ong argue that Plato's depiction of Aspasia represents "a collection of ideas including not only the fifth-century democracy and rhetoric in general but a sophistic rhetoric practiced almost exclusively by non-Athenians" (1995, p. 17). This process of aligning Aspasia with rhetoric, sophists, and foreigners is clearly an "othering" strategy. Plato ascribes a tangential, secondary role for outsiders or non-Athenians, a category to which most sophists belonged--just as he argues for a subordinate position for women. Hence, Plato's Aspasia is a rich symbol for the undesirable "other."

Similarly, Swearingen argues that Plato's depiction of Diotima functions to place her in contradiction to Plato's dualist philosophy. Plato characterizes Diotima's speaking and teaching as sophist-like: Diotima is indeed a teacher who speaks 'like one of our best sophists' (208c); she develops views and positions in a speech; she questions traditional views; and she dissents from those who have preceded her in the dialogue" (1995, p. 47). Plato's characterization of both Aspasia and Diotima serves to cast a negative light on both the sophists and women.

Historical Consequences Both Deep and Wide

The influence of the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle on Western culture for two thousand years after their death virtually cannot be exaggerated. From Augustine to the Christian Coalition, many religious, secular, and popular philosophies are deeply rooted in the Greek philosophical tradition. Aristotelian concepts and theories of nature were appropriated by the early church fathers. Aristotle's rationalist philosophy was used to legitimate the church's

patriarchal hierarchy (Merrill, 1996, p. 57) Indeed, his misogynist view of women lives on today in various permutations. But what salience, specifically, does this philosophical tradition have for communication students today, particularly in regard to their study of relationships between gender and communication?

First, a tradition which places women within a category of "others," set off from the public dialogue--not privy to the process of engaging in the knowledge-creating discourses of a society or an age--severs the threads which create a continuous intellectual tradition. This is one of the main arguments that emerges from Merrill's research on the social construction of Western women's rhetoric (1996). If women are unaware of a rich history of discourse addressing life from their experience, each generation--in effect--must begin anew, reinventing the wheel generation after generation. This laborious task itself is something with which men have no experience. The words of great men have been passed down from antiquity to contemporary society. A continuity exists which makes it possible to build upon--or adapt--a previous idea, concept, or theory.

The process of severing intellectual threads is long and complicated, but one effective way of doing so is simply to erase influential women rhetors from history. The various women discussed in Andrea Lunsford's anthology, *Reclaiming Rhetorica*, are a "who's who" list of influential women rhetors that most young women have never heard of: Aspasia and Diotima, both Greek teachers of rhetoric; Margery Kempe, an English autobiographer of the 13th century whose work is often dismissed as postpartum hysteria; Christine de Pisan, the foremost woman rhetorician of the medieval era and Europe's first professional woman writer whose intensely popular works challenged misogyny of the times; Mary Astell, an important English feminist of

the 17th century who made the art of conversation central to her theory of rhetoric; Mary Wollstonecraft, whose landmark work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in 1792 used men's own theories against them to point out the irrationality of their treatises against women; Margaret Fuller, whose book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, used conversation to develop a rhetoric appropriate to feminist consciousness; Ida B. Wells, a major African-American rhetor who, at the turn of the century, sustained the anti-lynching campaign for forty years, and others--many of which we probably have not yet discovered. And while the works of the women discussed in the Lundsford anthology are for the most part extant, nearly all of the ancient Greek writer Sappho's poetry--ridiculed by classical Greek culture--was later burned by the early Church fathers (Merrill, 1996, p. 40). Another sort of erasure has occurred in that the very existence of women like Aspasia and Diotima is today questioned by scholars who argue that they are merely literary creations--character devices created by the likes of Plato (Swearingen, 1995, pp. 27-28).

A second consequence of this philosophical tradition is to ignore, dismiss, or belittle rhetorical styles and forms employed by women. This is really another way to sever the threads of continuity. Lundsford argues that "the realm of rhetoric has been almost exclusively male not because women were not practicing rhetoric--the arts of language are after all at the source of human communication--but because the tradition has never recognized the forms, strategies, and goals used by many women as 'rhetorical'" (1995, p. 6). This does not mean that women necessarily use a rhetorical style antithetical to traditional rhetoric, nor are writers in agreement that there is or should be a "women's rhetoric," but throughout history women have had to forge a way into the public sphere--like a woman barging into a men's club--to gain access. Because their experiences have been different, many women create a rhetoric--or rhetorics--which in many

ways diverge from the traditional tenets of male oriented theories of rhetoric. For example, Sappho's style employed an "intensely personal point of view, strong emotion, concrete imagery, nature references, dialogue, apostrophe or invocation, and the beauty of verse and melody . . ." (Merrill, 1996, p. 43). Christine Mason Sutherland describes her observations about women's rhetoric as follows: "I think it can be seen in selection of subject matter; in the relationship with the audience (communication rather than self-expression); in a conversational style; in a resistance to what Ong calls adversativeness, and to the hero as model for the writer; and in tact. Corresponding 'weaknesses' (from the more traditional point of view) are lack of force and lack of focus" (quoted in Lundsford, 1995, p. 321). Similarly, Arabella Lyon explains women's rhetoric as follows:

"I believe that this difficulty in self-definition led women rhetoricians to reject individualist concepts of free will and to conceptualize a subject-in-process, a fragmentary psyche, and knowledge through sharing long before other rhetoricians. In turn, the subject-in-process suggests a very different rhetoric, one far more dynamic, interactive, and intertextual than those based on a Cartesian subject. . . . A women's rhetoric would both accept and value that dialogue with the audience since it changes *both* the rhetor's and the audience's beliefs" (quoted in Lundsford, 1995, p. 322)

This is the sort of "non-rhetorical" rhetoric that Karlyn Kohrs Campbell discovered in her analysis of Women's Liberation rhetoric many years ago. She discovered that rhetoric of first wave of contemporary feminism was characteristically atypical. It was not leader-centered, it emphasized "acts concerned with personal exigences and private, concrete experience," while its goal was "frequently limited to particular, autonomous action by individuals" (1973, p. 86).

For students, the erasure or dismissal of women means that *if* they are receiving *any* education in the history and theory of rhetoric, they are most likely receiving only a *partial* history. Furthermore, this is a history that matters to the student of gender communication. It is

a history which reveals the process that has been used to make "natural" what is really only linguistically and socially constructed. It is a history capable of casting light on contemporary gender issues. It is a history which can make them better (more aware and responsible) critical thinkers, better thinkers, better communicators, and better partners in their various interpersonal relationships.

Conclusions

Since the theme of this panel is rhetoric across the discipline, I will conclude by suggesting ways in which the rhetorical and philosophical history I have outlined here can be addressed in gender studies within communication departments. As a rhetorician, I believe the ideal situation is to require of communication majors some background in rhetorical history and theory. In our department we currently require any one theory class, but we also address these ancient philosophical tensions within one of our two required "Introduction" courses. Even so, discussions of classical rhetorical history do not typically make the link between the privileging of Platonic and Aristotelian perspectives and the consequences for women. Indeed, the most recent edition of Golden, Berquist, and Coleman's *The Rhetoric of Western Thought*, treats women as an afterthought in rhetorical history, devoting but one essay about women by Beth Waggenpack stuck at the back of the book. And this essay is hardly satisfying. Its primary focus is a series of brief biographies about a few major women rhetoricians in Western history. So, I would argue for the integration of women's history into rhetorical history and theory, just as women's studies scholars have argued for the inclusion of women across the university curriculum.

Additionally, when gender roles and constructions are discussed in communication courses, I believe it is important to offer a brief overview of this history--as I have done here--to

indicate how deeply entrenched the "naturalizing" of these gender constructions has become in the Western psyche. To ignore this context is to leave students with less than adequate critical tools for understanding contemporary manifestations of misogyny. Conversely, to introduce students to this historical context is to offer a framework from which they can come to understand the links between philosophical perspectives and their very material effect on people.

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